

On Torture and the Achaemenids

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The thesis of Bruce Lincoln's new book is stated on p. xv:

In the chapters that follow, I hope to show how Achaemenian Persia perceived itself as God's chosen instrument for the project of world salvation, and, as such, supreme benefactor of the peoples it conquered. Beyond this, I am led to argue that such a perspective led the Achaemenians into severe contradictions, which they attempted to suppress and deny, using some rather desperate measures toward that impossible end. This analysis suggests comparison to certain contemporary data.

This book takes on a very weighty project, one presenting both historical arguments and reflections on empire in general. Working backward through the thesis, the book attempts to contemplate the Achaemenid empire in a way that sheds light on current events—particularly the American occupation of Iraq starting in 2003. Although this is only a small part of the book, it frames the argument (and appears in the title) and therefore deserves careful consideration. As a historical argument, I find this part of Lincoln's thesis unpersuasive; it relies upon an outmoded view of the Achaemenid empire, yet his general reflections on empire certainly strike home, and are poignant and jarring. Yet I think these also miss the mark when he applies them to Achaemenid history. While certainly correct in general, they fail to take into account the complexities of power in empire.

The unifying theme of this book is the use and justification of torture as an instrument of imperial control, and Lincoln bookends his argument with two shocking descriptions, the first Achaemenid: According to Ctesias (in Plutarch *Artaxerxes* 16.1–4), Artaxerxes II subjected a Persian soldier to the ordeal of the troughs for revealing how Cyrus the Younger died in the battle of Cunaxa. The second is the American treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The parallels between these two forms of torture, especially when juxtaposed against the lofty ideals of empire ("the pursuit of paradise," p. 2), led Lincoln to investigate the relationships among religion, torture, and empire.

The introduction (chapter one), which serves to provide a historical overview of the first three kings of the Achaemenid empire (Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius), contains a troubling discrepancy. Lincoln states outright that, with regard to Cyrus' genealogy in the Cyrus Cylinder, "none of the names that enter this list—his own included—have an identifiable etymology, least of all one that would place them in the Iranian language family" (p. 3). This intimates that Cyrus was something other than Iranian (in the ethno-linguistic sense), but Lincoln makes nothing more of it. Although he skillfully describes Darius' incorporation of Cyrus' Teispid line into the Achaemenid, he skips over the thorny problem of the ethnicity of Cyrus and Cambyses.

This is by no means an easy issue, but Lincoln wants it both ways. On the one hand, he needs Cyrus to be an outsider to the Persian tradition, so that he can stress Darius' ushering

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in of new traditions (see pp. 12f. and 44) or his fronting of the Persianness of his empire in contradistinction to Cyrus (see, for example, pp. 22ff.). On the other hand, he also wants Cyrus to be Persian in order to tie his deeds into distinctly Persian traditions (see, for example, pp. 28f. and 95). This leads to unfortunate internal contradictions. On one page Lincoln states that Cyrus and his ancestors do not have Iranian names (p. 3), and on another, in reference to Cyrus' birth legend in Herodotus, that "Cyrus' father and patriline were *unambiguously* Persian" (p. 33, emphasis mine).

The problem here is real. This book strives hard to read motives into the deeds of Cyrus and Cambyses, yet can we attribute Mazdaean thought patterns to kings who, for all we know, rose out of the ethno-cultural Iranian/Elamite mix of southwest Iran in the mid-first-millennium B.C., kings who never mention the Wise Lord? Kings with non-Persian names? One could make the argument that Greek and Biblical evidence represents a reconceptualization of Cyrus and Cambyses—one arising under the control of Persocentric court scribes in power after 522—but Lincoln does not pursue that argument. It would also move us further away from understanding the actual motives of these kings in history, a theme which figures largely in this book.

A second issue is more problematic. Lincoln's historical sketch of the empire after Xerxes' accession—about 150 years of history—is but two paragraphs long (p. 14). The native Persian sources, it is true, all but die off after the reign of Xerxes, and Lincoln does give the usual warning of not falling prey to the "Orientalizing tropes as regards Persian luxury, decadence, despotism, and palace intrigue" (p. 14) that one finds in Greek and biblical sources. Yet this is not good enough, as Lincoln makes a distinct historical argument about the relationship between torture and empire. In fact, what is most troublesome about this glossing over of 150 years of history is that it comes close to resurrecting the very stereotypes Lincoln warns against.

The thesis of the book posits an unfolding empire. In the beginning, the empire justified the violence needed to establish itself with the notion that "not only force, but also truth and virtue flow outward from a uniquely privileged center to reach and transform lesser, outlying peoples . . . where [such force] is used to transform and perfect the world according to God's original plan for creation" (p. 95). Indeed, as Lincoln avers, Achaemenid ideology was particularly suited to justifying such campaigns. But he further argues that violence crippled this ideology as the empire lived on; he states:

having overcome the problem of moral hesitation by wrapping even its most distasteful actions in an ennobling, sanctifying discourse, the empire now faces the possibility of moral exhaustion, in which its animating discourse loses all credibility, by virtue of its complicit relation to those same repugnant actions (p. 96).

He goes on to argue that in such situations leaders of empire needed to force themselves and their soldiers to believe that the sanctifying discourse of old still applied. As he sees it, the empire developed from one in which the leaders were able to use ideology to justify or dismiss the violence necessary to carve out that empire, to one whose leaders instigated displays of violence in order to force the argument that such ideology still applied (p. 96).

This is a weighty critique of empire and a complex argument about the intersection of social action, religion, ideology, and power. Yet by characterizing the Achaemenid empire as, in its first fifty years, carving out a lofty ideology to justify its violence, and then, for its last 150 years, paying scant attestation to this way of thinking beyond the employment of torture devices, Lincoln assumes that the empire experienced a decline from its sanctifying ideals over a century and a half.

This comes to stark realization in the case of Mithradates and the ordeal of the troughs. At one point Lincoln throws ideology aside and says, “[Artaxerxes II] was not God’s agent, defending truth against the lie, and struggling to restore primordial perfection. Rather, he was defending himself against gossip that undermined state propaganda that labored to establish his reputation and status as Cyrus’ slayer, rightful king, and champion of truth” (p. 94). This is exactly correct, and a comparison between his take on the ordeal of the troughs and another part of the book is illuminating:

The battles, moreover, were bloody. Casualties in excess of 120,000 dead are reported, and all the rebels were executed, often by *impaling, and accompanied by scores of their noble supporters* . . . [two particular rebels] *were tortured, mutilated, and placed on public display*, lest anyone think it was possible to roll back the clock and restore the situation that preceded Persian supremacy (p. 8, emphasis mine).

This is Lincoln’s summary of the fate of the victims of Darius’ reconstitution of the empire as related in the Behistun inscription. Here we have piles of bodies and public mutilations presented along with one of the few written Persian justifications for such treatment (the victims lied, or took sides with the Lie). In Ctesias, we have a gossip court historian’s lurid description of the execution of a potential political troublemaker.

How do these accounts differ? For Lincoln, the latter method of execution (the troughs) serves as a “leitmotif—when the empire finds it increasingly difficult to contain the contradiction between its discourse and its practice” (p. 95). That is to say, Artaxerxes’ use of a gruesome method of execution serves as an example of imperial violence no longer justified by the ideology it served. For Darius, the conquest, the “pursuit of paradise,” and the notion that virtue flows outward from the center served to explain the violence away.

I find this unconvincing. One should not take the lack of Persian sources developing an ideology after Xerxes as evidence that the contradiction between discourse and practice became difficult to maintain. In point of fact, Artaxerxes II had one of the longest reigns of any Achaemenid king (404–358 B.C.), he lived to the age of ninety, and kingship was transferred smoothly to his son after his death (although admittedly many contenders had earlier died off in various palace plots). Although Artaxerxes II never regained Egypt after it was lost in the succession crisis, other evidence bespeaks a reign of stability and strength of empire. In the absence of competing information, it seems safer to hold that the ideology established by Darius and Xerxes remained strong enough to sanctify Artaxerxes’ actions, rather than to assume that the ideological basis of the empire had broken apart and exposed its flaws.

But decline is essential to Lincoln’s argument. He later compares the troughs to the atrocities at Abu Ghraib (pp. 104ff.), regarding them as spectacles with the same goal, namely “to restore flagging moral confidence so that the troops can continue to commit the atrocities and engage in the depravities on which an empire depends” (p. 107). I think this cheapens his point. I would argue that the contradiction between lofty discourse and gruesome practice is omnipresent in empire, that Darius’ impalings and Artaxerxes’ troughs are bound together in the same continuum of controlling information and maintaining power. In point of fact, the troughs are a leitmotif *of empire*, not of an empire losing its bearings. Lincoln seems to concede as much at times, but the overall theme (e.g., “I am led to differentiate two phases in the history of empire,” p. 94) reveals an understanding of the Achaemenid empire that is very out of date.

A more unfortunate concern lurks behind all of this. Although it is more sophisticated, Lincoln’s portrayal of the Achaemenids resembles the classic notion of Persian decadence,

with frivolous later Achaemenids dismissing the earlier ideals of the empire for wealth and bloodlust. The implied parallels to George W. Bush—the lazy, incompetent scion of a president, incurious in life, impudent in power, and not even remotely self-aware—only exacerbate this notion. This unseemly association will present itself all too easily to casual readers of this book.

The ability of the Persians to control massive numbers of people over thousands of miles of territory for hundreds of years has fascinated outsiders since the time of Cyrus. Based on the studies of Pierre Briant, whose work is all but absent from this book, a revolution in our understanding of the Achaemenid empire has taken place in recent years, and Lincoln's postscript on Abu Ghraib led me to hope that he would apply this new understanding to modern events. There is much to be learned from Persian practice of empire, and parts of Lincoln's book are on target, yet I found the torture comparison strained and unpersuasive. It is tempting to compare a buffoonish American president to the kings of an empire in decline, but the analogy fails on the Persian side, relying as it does on a view of the Persian empire that is incomplete and reductive.

One of the major challenges facing those who work on Persian religion is that the distilling ideology out of the sources requires a very sensitive interpretative touch. One has to present these sources in such a way that they do justice to the fact that, on balance, the religious statements of the Persian kings are terse, circumscribed in time and place, and largely idiosyncratic. To my mind, it is only with extreme caution that one can use them to reconstruct the ideology of the Achaemenid Empire as a whole.

Lincoln is certainly aware of this, saying as much in his own words (pp. 10f.). But it becomes clear early in the book that he has taken many interpretational liberties, as best demonstrated in chapter two. He argues here that the Behistun relief is a visual portrayal of the Zoroastrian dualistic cosmological battle between good and evil. In his view, the middle of the relief—the space between God (Ahuramazda) above and the Lie (Gaumata) below—depicts earth, the field of battle between good and evil. He sees a dualism on the horizontal plane as well (albeit in a “weaker form,” p. 20), where the good is led by Darius and “the Persians,” who stand to the left of the relief, against the evil liar kings, lined up before the king at the right of the relief. In this up-down, left-right visual representation of the struggle between good and evil, he argues that

loyal Persians (Darius and his two helpers) are connected to the divine, transcendent above, while the disloyal others are similarly consigned to a devalued below. Characterized in negative terms by the absence of weapons, stature, dignity, and truth, as well as by distance from the divine, that space might also be considered infernal or demonic (p. 22).

Is this really so? Evil, as personified in Gaumata, is not in fact below Darius; Gaumata is on the same plane, only supine while Darius stands. But this is the least of the problems. First—and most obvious—Darius is not at the center of the composition (*pace* p. 17), nor do “both the vertical and horizontal axes center on the figure of Darius” (p. 22). One can usually let misstatements such as these pass, but Lincoln's Figure 5 (p. 21), a “compositional structure” of the Behistun relief, builds upon them. To me, this schema borders on caricature. There is certainly an orderliness to Behistun, but Lincoln distorts the position of Darius to make his point, which ends up greatly detracting from it.

Furthermore, a glance at the relief itself also disproves the notion that “distance to the divine” makes the space of the nine liar kings negative or demonic. In point of fact, at least four of the nine liar kings are closer to Ahuramazda than Darius himself; one of them (number three) is so close to the divine that his later-added caption had to be written on his

waist, rather than above him, as was the case for the others. While the diminished status, lack of weapons, and captive nature of the liars certainly speaks to their status vis-à-vis Darius, it is quite a reach to see the Behistun relief as a depiction of good-evil, above-below, left-right dualism.

Lincoln demands interpretational flexibility, and this often impairs his arguments. Beyond that, the acceptance of much of these chapters will depend on the proclivities of the reader. For example, I am always dubious of the use of very late Zoroastrian scripture for understanding the Achaemenids, yet this is accepted by some, and has a long scholarly pedigree.

It is also in these chapters that the reflective part of Lincoln's thesis, that the Achaemenid empire thought itself to be "God's chosen instrument for the project of world salvation, and, as such, supreme benefactor of the peoples it conquered," comes through and deserves consideration. Even though I think Lincoln is wildly off in his description of Behistun, the basic notion in chapter two is a poignant one:

When those who define themselves as inhabiting the center also construe that site as more noble, more worthy, more moral than the periphery—as was true in Median, Persian, and general Iranian cosmology—they can theorize conquest as a benevolent act that brings benefits to the conquered (p. 26).

Lincoln marshals an impressive array of evidence to make this point. Putting the historical problems aside (e.g., do we really know anything about Median cosmology?), one cannot help but be struck by the comparison between the Achaemenid theme that Lincoln pursues here and the parts of Bush's Mission Accomplished speech that he italicizes in the final chapter ("*we have fought for the cause of liberty, and for the peace of the world . . . the tyrant has fallen and Iraq is free,*" pp. 97f.).

I am less persuaded by the following two chapters. Much of chapter three ("God's Chosen") involves stories about Cyrus and Cambyses, who carry with them particular problems when discussed in Persian history (as noted above). Those notwithstanding, I think Lincoln oversimplifies an aspect of empire that, when reconsidered, is particularly germane in both the Persian and American contexts.

Lincoln pursues a familiar argument in this chapter, that the "Achaemenid king[s] labored—with considerable ingenuity—to combine dynastic and charismatic arguments for the legitimacy of [their] rule" (p. 43). Interestingly, he defines the force of charisma as the "will of the gods" (saying that "the two are one and the same," p. 36). One of the Persians' ingenious ways of carving out legitimacy was to style themselves as liberators, which Lincoln calls

one of the great imperial fantasies . . . for it is far easier to commit the acts of violence that make conquest possible when one is convinced that the cause is . . . moral and divinely ordained . . . [and] if the [conquered subjects] can be persuaded that the new master is a distinct improvement over their former rulers—better yet, that he comes to them courtesy of a loving god who sincerely cares for their welfare—they will be ever so much more likely to accept the yoke in relative quiescence (p. 40).

This is certainly correct, but misses a larger point. Most of the sources he quotes in this chapter are local (i.e., not Iranian) sources: The Cyrus Cylinder was written in Babylonian, the Book of Isaiah in Hebrew, and the Apries story presumably circulated among Egyptians (compare the Udjahoresent stele, which is not used here). That is to say, at least some important people among the subject populations participated in this imperial fantasy; they created, in the local language, the legitimacy necessary for the Persians to rule over them with great success for two hundred years.

Lincoln might dismiss these cooperators as “toadies eager to ingratiate themselves while others mask their feelings with smiles and bide their time before taking action” (p. 40), but in doing so he sets up a binary opposition between rulers and ruled that is too simple. Imperial control requires the acquiescence of local elites and centers of power, and the motives behind such acquiescence will vary. Some might indeed set out to rebel against the empire; others might try to take over and reconstitute the empire for themselves (as did, for example, Cyrus and Darius). Some might work for the occupying power for riches, stability, or protection; still others might be forced to acquiesce by the threat of violence. In my opinion, the fact that locals lent their gods and language of liberation to the Achaemenids is more a factor of local power dynamics than of any Achaemenid ideology or policy.

This is particularly germane in comparison to the American invasion of Baghdad in 2003, which had absolutely no support from local centers of power. In fact, de-Bathification, the dismissal of the Iraqi army, and the disbanding of the local police led to Hobbesian anarchy in Iraq, setting the stage for the violent insurgency. Yet, in the early days of the war, all of this occurred while the White House successfully controlled the message, making it look (and possibly believing) as though it had acquired legitimacy through the act of liberation alone. The toppling and desecration of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square was—and astonishingly still is—portrayed as an act of spontaneous emotion by liberated Iraqis. The reality, as Lincoln states, is that it was a scripted affair, and the liberated Iraqis were expatriate goons, long on the U.S. payroll, flown in essentially to simulate legitimacy for television cameras (pp. 99f.).

Those are toadies. Compare them to the Iraqi officer mentioned by Charles Ferguson:

One of the officers I was working with—one of the Iraqi officers—toward the end of the second or third meeting, when Baghdad was going, it was in chaos, said, “Colonel Paul, I can have ten thousand military policemen for you next week. You just tell me.” I took this back to Bernie Kerik’s staff, and nothing was done with it. But ten thousand Iraqi police would have made a big difference . . . in controlling Baghdad.¹

This quote is from Colonel Paul Hughes, who was a key member of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. The power dynamics of the situation he describes go well beyond a simple split between rulers and ruled; toadyism is far from an apt description of the unnamed (and unsmiling) Iraqi officer’s motives.

The comparison between Babylonian, Hebrew, and Egyptian panegyrics, written in order to integrate the Achaemenids into local patterns of legitimacy, and the actions of expatriate thugs attacking a statue while, in order to reign in chaos, a native military officer begs the occupying power to reconstitute his unit, serves the point well. Empire is complicated. Local centers of power can be co-opted for imperial control; the leaders of these centers of power may or may not choose to work with the imperial powers, but their reasons for doing so are manifold and complex. To dismiss those who do cooperate as toadies or soon-to-be rebels, or to assume they only do so because they have fallen under the sway of imperial propaganda, is to miss a lot about empire. Cyrus, Cambyses, and the Achaemenids were astonishingly good at winning over such centers of power; apparently, George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld didn’t even try.

In the end, much of this book reads like unpolished thoughts, those of a scholar who, seeing history repeat itself, tries quickly to elucidate the material that he knows best in order to warn the world (note, for example, the chapter descriptions on pp. xv and 16). For this

1. Charles Ferguson, *No End in Sight: Iraq’s Descent into Chaos* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 126.

reason, I am of two minds. On the one hand, it is flawed. This is not an up-to-date presentation of the Persian empire; in fact, it comes close to perpetuating age-old stereotypes. On the other hand, the lessons of this book are noble and poignant, and less-than-accurate accounts of the Achaemenid empire have been employed successfully for weighty didactic purposes since Herodotus and Xenophon. It is time for Americans to learn again from the example of the empire carved out by Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, and, despite its faults, *Religion, Empire, and Torture* is a good place to start.

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